

## Vanilla Is Uganda's Green Gold

To the 30 prospective vanilla growers who had traveled hundreds of miles to hear him speak, Hajji Yunus Lubwama's words seemed harsh. The semicircle of men and women shifted nervously and uncomfortably when Hajji Yunus departed from the basic lessons of vanilla farming to offer his common sense warnings.

"Do not think it is easy," he said. "It is not for the lazy. The prices will not remain strong forever. Many will not see the success that we have here."

Indeed, success was a lesson in hard work and patience for his family, multiplied by tremendous market prices. Hajjati Haawa Lubwama, Hajji Yunus' wife of 22 years, says that beginning in 1992, after years of subsistence farming with maize, potatoes and bananas, the family decided to take a chance on the lucrative but highly volatile cash crop known to many as "green gold." Vanilla was known in Uganda to be a hit-or-miss crop—unfortunate considering Uganda is the only country that boasts two dry seasons strong enough to support two vanilla harvests.

But vanilla may yet become an extremely effective tool to attack rural poverty, since vines must be pollinated by hand, a time-consuming process that favors small-scale growers over large commercial farms. USAID agricultural assistants fanned out across the country to conduct field demonstrations, which is where Hajji Yunus and his family learned of vanilla's potential.



Photo: DGL Felo

Hajjati Haawa Lubwama cares for her vanilla vines near Mukono in Uganda.

Hajjati Haawa dug into the earth around a shade tree and planted a vine in the soil, buried it with an organic mixture of mulch, soil and cow dung and trained the vine around the tree's branches. Fifty demonstration sites like her family's have been established over the last eight years in 18 of Uganda's districts. The estimated number of vanilla producers in select areas has also jumped, from 4,000 in 1995 to 15,000 in 2003.

*The export of Ugandan  
vanilla increased from  
\$8,000 and 0.2 tons in 1995  
to nearly  
\$25 million and 132 tons in 2003—  
thanks, in part, to  
USAID training and assistance.*

To further boost vanilla's viability, USAID provided market information for producers via radio, helped producers find processors, helped processors find investors and facilitated local financing for exporters. Previously, there were only two active companies that bought and processed vanilla in Uganda. Now there are ten in the Uganda National Vanilla Association network, which meets regularly to set harvesting dates and quality parameters.

To help increase the quality in post-harvest and post-production of vanilla, USAID and the association contracted a local laboratory to analyze the vanilla before it is shipped. In addition, a new association, VANEX, has been established that is dedicated to the long-term growth of the vanilla industry, offering such outreach as security awareness programs to help prevent theft.

Hajjati Haawa's family now earns more than \$23 a pound for their vanilla and they have bought a new home—proof of vanilla's potential. Now thousands more Ugandans have the same opportunity.